

## *Negotiating with Death*

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We're born into this world that has so much aging, illness, death. It's all around us. We look inside us. It's everywhere. The question is, what are we going to allow these things to take away from us? And what can we hold onto in spite of them?

We were talking today about one of the necessary skills in negotiating, which is having a very clear sense of what you don't want to give away at all. And the rule is to let go of other things so that you can hold onto the one thing that's most precious. And so in this mass of body and mind that we call us, what's there to hold onto? Well, the Buddha says, there are the qualities of the path. You have your actions. Those go with you: the results of your actions. So you want to hold onto the principle that you're going to try to do what's skillful. It starts from the outside and goes to the inside. Let go of things that are clearly not skillful. And have a clear sense of which things that you hold onto will get in the way of holding onto good things. Those are things you've got to learn how to let go.

So you're negotiating with death, basically. This is one of the reasons why the Buddha says, in relation to your virtue, any loss in terms of your health, loss in terms of your relatives, loss in terms of your wealth, doesn't really matter that much. But loss in terms of your virtue and your right view: That matters a lot. So virtue and right view are things you want to hold onto.

Even before death comes, we're negotiating a lot about how we find our happiness in the world. And a lot of the problem comes from the fact that we tend to glom things together. You gain some happiness from a particular relationship, so you figure that happiness has to depend on is that relationship. Then it ends and your happiness falls apart. You pull the pieces together again and then you look for another relationship. You've glommed the happiness to your desire for a relationship.

The Buddha says you've got to learn how to un-glom these things. The mind has a tendency to glom these things together, partly because we're ignorant and partly because we're hungry. It's through the force of hunger and the force of pain that we simply grab onto whatever we can, putting things together in whatever way seems to make sense so that we can keep on going. But in the process of that, we've glommed a lot of things together that are a mixture of good and bad, and don't really have to be together. This is why the Buddha has us analyze things. You

glom your happiness out of what you sense around the body? Well, he says, take that apart.

What in the body is there worth holding onto that would make you do something unskillful? Take the body apart in terms of the 32 parts, or however many parts you want, to see that the body itself is not of any essential worth. It's worthwhile in the good that we can do with it, but in and of itself, it's not that much. Similarly with the mind: He has us take things apart, like the five aggregates. It seems to be a strange way of dividing up the pie. You've got form, which is the body; feelings: i.e., feelings of pleasure, pain, and neither pleasure nor pain. Perceptions: the labels you place on things. Fabrications, which are all the things you put together in the mind, to make thoughts that make sense. And then consciousness. Prior to the Buddha's time, these various concepts were floating around in India. But he was the one who put them together as a set and said that it's out of this set that we create a sense of who we are. As long as we identify with these things, we're going to suffer. And not only that, we're going to do things that are unskillful in our attempt to hang onto them.

The question comes up, "Why did he choose these five categories? There are lots of other ways you could divide up the processes of the mind. And the answer seems to be that these are the processes that go into the activity of feeding. You've got the body here that you want to maintain. And then there's the form of things out there you want to feed on or you could feed on. There's the feeling of hunger that drives you to feed and the feeling of satisfaction that comes after you've fed. There are your perceptions—on the one hand, perceiving what kind of hunger you've got: are you hungry for salt, hungry for sugar, hungry for water? Hungry for something light, something heavier? And then your perceptions also identify mental hungers. What does the mind feel the need for right now? There are also the perceptions of what would satisfy your particular hunger. As for fabrication, that starts with the process of finding what you want, which you've identified as the proper food to feed that hunger. Then it fabricates whatever you've got to do to fix the food so that you can actually digest it. You get a raw potato. What do you do with it so that you can actually eat it? That's fabrication. Then finally, consciousness: the awareness of all these things. These are the activities that are basic to the most basic activity we do: feeding. And it's around these activities that we create our sense of self.

So when your sense of self is getting in the way, it's good to take it apart. See exactly where you're identifying with something that's going to make you do something unskillful. So even though the categories may seem a little strange, they actually have a use. They have a purpose. The Buddha never simply takes categories

from his culture and imposes them on the Dhamma. His attitude was that when they're useful, he'll take them. And he lists them in ways that are really helpful.

The same with the four frames of reference that we practice in establishing mindfulness: body, feelings, mind, mental qualities. Feeling there is one of the difficult ones, because the word "feeling" in English has lots of meanings. You feel your body. And you also feel pleasure and pain. And also you feel sadness or joy, whatever. So you've got three kinds of feeling, just feeling the presence of the body, feelings of pleasure and pain, and then your emotions. What the Buddha's talking about here is the second one: feelings of pleasure, pain, or neutral—neither pleasure nor pain.

Your sense of the body, that's actually something else. And that's a very useful distinction to make right there. You sit here and pain comes up in part of the body, and you immediately glom the physical side—your sense of the body, which basically comes down to properties of solidity, warmth, coolness, energy—together with the pain. And then you think that pain is there in your body. It's invaded you and it's become solid like the body. And you can get all worked up about it. But if you can see the actual feelings of pleasure and pain are one thing and the warmth of the body and the solidity of the body and the energy are different things, then the pain's not so oppressive. For one thing, it doesn't get in the way of the breath. All too often, there's a sense inside that when you breathe in, the energy of the breath can go only up to a pain but then it has to stop. The pain is a wall. And that perception right there creates a lot of unnecessary pain. Or you tense up around the pain. But if you unglom these things, you can hold the perception that the breath energy can go through. The breathing is a different process. And allowing the breath to go through the pain can often work through any unnecessary tension you build up around the pain.

But even deeper, you begin to see that the pain is one thing and the breath is something else. Even though they're in the same space, they're on different frequencies, or different levels. You realize that the pain is not invading you. You're the one who's invading the pain. You've taken it on, made it part of your identity, and now you're trying to push it out. But if you can actually see distinctly, you can detect that this is a pain sensation, whereas these are, in the Buddha's terms, earth for solidity; water for liquidity, or coolness; fire for warmth; breath for energy. If it's just earth, or water, or fire, or energy, that's one kind of sensation. The pain is another kind of sensation. If you can see them as distinct, you don't have to suffer from the pain nearly as much as you would otherwise.

Then you begin to see exactly what's going on in the pain. You can start taking it apart. The big pain monster suddenly becomes just little bits and pieces of things

that are not so scary after all. And when it's not so scary, it pains you a lot less. So those are two of the frames of reference.

The other two, mind and mental qualities: Again, this may seem an arbitrary way of dividing up the pie. But it's useful. The mind, you could think of as the entire committee of the mind that has made a decision. It's on the side of greed or on the side of anger—or on the opposite side. Or you're trying to get the mind to settle down, so you check your progress against the Buddha's list. Either it's concentrated or it's not. And when it's not concentrated, it might be because it's too energetic; too scattered or too depressed.

But the Buddha doesn't just leave us there with those states of mind. This is what the mental qualities are for. We've got to figure out which actions in the mind brought about that committee decision, and which actions can undo it. You want to take it apart; see what's going in to make that up. And you see that it's made up of these mental qualities. It might be the five hindrances. Or it might be a sense of clinging to something you've seen or heard or smelled or tasted, felt, cognized with the mind. When you can divide and can analyze what's going on in these terms, then you know what to do. Look at the problem in terms of the frames of reference he gives for mental qualities. You've got the hindrances. Okay, once you recognize that something is a hindrance in the mind, and you remember what to do. The Buddha has all these instructions for how to abandon that particular hindrance.

All too often, when a particular hindrance comes in, we don't see it as a hindrance. We just see it as part of us. If there's desire, the object that you focus on really is desirable. Even if someone else were to look in on your fantasies about what's desirable and say, "Good grief. How could you desire that?" But you're not thinking in those terms. You're just thinking about how much it really is desirable. Well, the Buddha helps you to step back and have that kind of "good grief" moment yourself. The same with anger, or ill will.

Even sleepiness: Step back from that a little bit. What's it made up out of? Sometimes it's just a pattern of sensations in the body that you've learned to interpret as, ah, a sign that the mind's tired; the body's tired. It's time to rest. Just take it apart in terms of those sensations. You see that it's not nearly as overpowering as you might have imagined. There are times, of course, when you really are sleepy. But the mind has the tendency to play a trick on itself, either when you're bored or something's coming up in the mind that you don't want to face. You suddenly get drowsy. Well, don't just take "sleepiness" as the diagnosis. Step back a bit. Say, "Okay, are you really drowsy? Or are you playing tricks?" Learn how to test it.

If a series of thoughts comes up in the mind that are really compelling, try to take them apart, say, “Okay what in here is an attachment to a sight, and what in here is attachment to a sound, and what is an attachment to a taste, or a smell, or feeling in the body or to a thought you’ve had?” Take it apart in terms of the six sense media. That’s another one of the frames of reference that the Buddha offers in this category of mental qualities.

As for good things, when concentration arises, when mindfulness arises, you don’t just sit there and watch them arise and then go. You try to develop the good things. These things fall under the factors for awakening. When you have a problem and you’re analyzing it and you seem to be getting someplace, okay, that’s analysis of qualities. That’s something to be encouraged. Not all thinking is to be discouraged while you’re meditating. When you’ve actually see that something is skillful or unskillful and you begin to get a handle on how to develop what’s skillful and abandon what’s not, pursue that line of thinking until it’s done its job, or until you find that it’s not making sense anymore: That’s when you go back to the concentration. But when these things arise in the mind, you have to learn to recognize, “Oh, these are on the skillful side.” And then think of all the teachings you’ve heard about how you develop what’s skillful in the mind.

So these modes of analysis for un-glomming things in the mind are there for you to get a handle on things so that you can use them for the sake of release. There are so many ways that you could analyze reality that would not lead to release. And those analyses may be true on their level, but if they tie the mind down, why get involved with them? You use them when they’re appropriate and then you put them aside. What we’re working on now is the question of how to divide up your sense of your body and mind so that you can find release.

And you can figure out what in here is worth holding onto and what’s worth letting go of. This is part of our negotiation. We’re negotiating with aging, illness, and death; figuring out what’s worth holding onto and what we can give away to them. A lot of things they’re going to take willy-nilly. But there are things that, if we know how to hold on properly, we can keep. Some people, when they start thinking about death, say, “Well. What the hell? I’m just going to do what I want. Everything’s going to die anyhow.” If you think in that way, you’ve handed all your treasures over to death.

The proper way to think is, “Certain qualities of the mind will go with me after I die. Certain habits will go with me. Whatever way my thinking is inclined right now, that’s going to be the inclination of how I go.” So incline things in the right direction. Let go of things that will pull you back in the wrong directions. This is

how you master the art of the deal—how you negotiate with aging, illness, and death and come out winning.